

WIDOW HILL



THE WORLDS OF THEODORE STURGEON

A NEW COLLECTION OF THE BEST FANTASY
NOVELETTES AND SHORT STORIES BY ONE OF
AMERICA'S MOST BRILLIANTLY
IMAGINATIVE TALENTS



Never Underestimate

Theodore Sturgeon

“She was brazen, of course,” said Luanda, passing the marmalade, “but the brass was beautifully polished. The whole thing made me quite angry, though at the same time I was delighted.”

Meticulously Dr. Lefferts closed the newly-arrived *Journal of the Microbiological Institute*, placed it on the copy of *Strength of Materials in Various Radioisotopic Alloys* which lay beside his plate, and carefully removed his pince-nez. “You begin in mid-sequence,” he said, picking up a butter knife. “Your thought is a predicate without a stated subject. Finally, your description of your reactions contains parts which appear mutually exclusive.” He attacked the marmalade. “Will you elucidate?”

Lucinda laughed good-naturedly. “Of course, darling. Where would you like me to begin?”

“Oh...” Dr. Lefferts made a vague gesture. “Practically anywhere. Anywhere at all. Simply supply more relative data in order that I may extrapolate the entire episode and thereby dispose of it. Otherwise I shall certainly keep returning to it all day long. Lucinda, why do you continually do this to me?”

“Do what, dear?”

“Present me with colorful trivialities in just such amounts as will make me demand to hear you out. I have a trained mind, Lucinda; a fine-honed, logical mind. It must think things through. You know that. Why do you continually *do* this to me?”

“Because,” said Lucinda placidly, “if I started at the beginning and went right through to the end, you wouldn’t listen.”

“I most certainly...eh. Perhaps you’re right.” He laid marmalade onto

an English muffin in three parallel bands, and began smoothing them together at right angles to their original lay. "You are right, my dear. That must be rather difficult for you from time to time...yes?"

"No indeed," said Lucinda, and smiled. "Not as long as I can get your full attention when I want it. And I can."

Dr. Lefferts chewed her statement with his muffin. At last he said, "I admit that in your inimitable—uh—I think one calls it *female* way, you can. At least in regard to small issues. Now do me the kindness to explain to me what stimuli could cause you to"—his voice supplied the punctuation—"feel 'quite angry' and 'delighted' simultaneously."

Lucinda leaned forward to pour fresh coffee into his cooling cup. She was an ample woman, with an almost tailored combination of svelteness and relaxation. Her voice was like sofa-pillows and her eyes like blued steel. "It was on the Boulevard," she said. "I was waiting to cross when this girl drove through a red light under the nose of a policeman. It was like watching a magazine illustration come to life—the bright yellow convertible and the blazing blonde in the bright yellow dress...darling, I do think you should call this year's bra manufacturers for consultation in your Anti-Gravity Research division. They achieve the most baffling effects...anyway, there she was and there by the car was the traffic cop, as red-faced and Hibernian a piece of typecasting as you could wish. He came blustering over to her demanding to know begorry—I think he actually did say begorry—was she color-blind now, or did she perhaps not give a care this marnin'?"

"In albinos," said Dr. Lefferts, "color perception is—"

Lucinda raised her smooth voice just sufficiently to override him without a break in continuity. "Now, here was an errant violation of the law, flagrantly committed under the eyes of an enforcement officer. I don't have to tell you what should have happened. What *did* happen was that the girl kept her head turned away from him until his hands were on the car door. In the sun that hair of hers was positively dazzling. When he was close enough—within range, that is—she tossed her hair back and was face to face with him. You could see that great lump of bog-peat turn to putty. And she said to him (and if I'd had a musical notebook with me I could have jotted down her voice in sharps and flats)—she said, 'Why, officer, I did it on purpose just so I could see you up close.'"

Dr. Lefferts made a slight, disgusted sound. "He arrested her."

"He did not," said Lucinda. "He shook a big thick finger at her as if she were a naughty but beloved child, and the push-button blarney that oozed out of him was as easy to see as the wink he gave her. That's what made me mad."

"And well it should." He folded his napkin. "Violations of the law should be immediately pun—"

"The law had little to do with it," Lucinda said warmly. "I was angry because I know what would have happened to you or to me in that same situation. We're just not equipped."

"I begin to see." He put his pince-nez back on and peered at her. "And what was it that delighted you?"

She stretched easily and half-closed her eyes. "The—what you have called the *femaleness* of it. It's good to be a woman, darling, and to watch another woman be female skillfully."

"I quarrel with your use of the term 'skillfully,'" he said, folding his napkin. "Her 'skill' is analogous to an odor of musk or other such exudation in the lower animals."

"It is *not*," she said flatly. "With the lower animals, bait of that kind means one thing and one thing only, complete and final. With a woman, it means nothing of the kind. Never mind what it *might* mean; consider what it *does* mean. Do you think for a moment that the blonde in the convertible was making herself available to the policeman?"

"She was hypothesizing a situation in which—"

"She was hypothesizing nothing of the kind. She was blatantly and brazenly getting out of paying a traffic fine, and that was absolutely all. And you can carry it one step further; do you think that for one split second the policeman actually believed that she was inviting him? Of course he didn't! And yet that situation is one that has obtained through the ages. Women have always been able to get what they wanted from men by pretending to promise a thing which they know men want but will not or cannot take. Mind you, I'm not talking about situations where this yielding is the main issue. I'm talking about the infinitely greater number of occasions where yielding has

nothing to do with it. Like weaseling out of traffic tickets.”

“Or skillfully gaining your husband’s reluctant attention over the breakfast table.”

Her sudden laughter was like a shower of sparks. “You’d better get down to the Institute,” she said. “You’ll be late.”

He arose, picked up his book and pamphlet, and walked slowly to the door. Lucinda came with him, hooking her arm through his. Suddenly he stopped, and without looking at her, asked quietly, “That policeman was a manipulated, undignified fool, wasn’t he?”

“Of course he was, darling, and it made a man of him.”

He nodded as if accepting a statistic, and, kissing her, walked out of the house.

Darling, she thought, dear sweet chrome-plated, fine-drawn, high-polished blueprint...I think I've found where you keep your vanity. She watched him walk with his even, efficient, unhurried stride to the gate. There he paused and looked back.

“This has been going on too long,” he called. “I shall alter it.”

Lucinda stopped smiling.

“May I come in?”

“Jenny, of course.” Lucinda went to the kitchen door and unhooked it. “Come in, come in. My, you’re prettier than ever this morning.”

“I brought you violets,” said Jenny breathlessly. “Just scads of ‘em in the woods behind my place. You took your red curtains down. Is that a new apron? My! You had Canadian bacon for breakfast.”

She darted in past Lucinda, a small, wiry, vibrant girl with sunlit hair and moonlight eyes. “Can I help with the dishes?”

“Thank you, you doll.” Lucinda took down a shallow glass bowl for the violets.

Jenny busily ran hot water into the sink. "I couldn't help seeing," she said. "Your big picture window...Lucinda, you *never* leave the breakfast dishes. I keep telling Bob, someday I'll have the routines you have, everything always so neat, never running out of anything, never in a hurry, never surprised...anyway, all the way over I could see you just sitting by the table there, and the dishes not done and all...is everything all right? I mean, don't tell me if I shouldn't ask, but I couldn't help..." Her voice trailed off into an ardent and respectful mumble.

"You're such a sweetheart," Lucinda said mistily. She came over to the sink carrying clean dishtowels and stood holding them, staring out past Jenny's head to the level lawns of the village. "Actually, I did have something on my mind...something..."

She related the whole conversation over breakfast that morning, from her abrupt and partial mentioning of the anecdote about the blonde and the policeman, to her husband's extraordinary and unequivocal statement about women's power over men: *This has been going on too long. I shall alter it.*

"Is that all?" Jenny asked when she had finished.

"Mm. It's all that was said."

"Oh, I don't think you should worry about that." She crinkled up her eyes, and Lucinda understood that she was putting herself and her young husband in the place of Lucinda and Dr. Lefferts, and trying to empathize a solution. "I think you might have hurt his feelings a little, maybe," Jenny said at length. "I mean, you admitted that you handled him in much the same way as that blonde handled the policeman, and then you said the policeman was a fool."

Lucinda smiled. "Very shrewd. And what's your guess about that parting shot?"

Jenny turned to face her. "You're not teasing me, asking my opinion, Lucinda? I never thought I'd see the day! Not you—you're so wise!"

Lucinda patted her shoulder. "The older I get, the more I feel that among women there is a lowest common denominator of wisdom, and that the chief difference between them is a random scattering of blind spots. No, honey, I'm not teasing you. You may be able to see just where I can't. Now tell me: what do you think he meant by that?"

"I shall alter it," Jenny quoted thoughtfully. "Oh, I don't think he meant anything much. You showed him how you could make him do things, and he didn't like it. He's decided not to let you do it any more, but—but..."

"But what?"

"Well, it's like with Bob. When he gets masterful and lays down the law I just agree with him. He forgets about it soon enough. If you agree with men all the time they can't get stubborn about anything."

Lucinda laughed aloud. "There's the wisdom!" she cried. Sobering, she shook her head. "You don't know the doctor the way I do. He's a great man—a truly great one, with a great mind. It's great in a way no other mind has ever been. He's—different. Jenny, I know how people talk, and what a lot of them say. People wonder why I married him, why I've stayed with him all these years. They say he's stuffy and didactic and that he has no sense of humor. Well, to them he may be; but to me he is a continual challenge. The rules-of-thumb that keep most men in line don't apply to him.

"And if he says he can do something, he can. If he says he will do something, he will."

Jenny dried her hands and sat down slowly. "He meant," she said positively, "that he would alter your ability to make him do things. Because the only other thing he could have meant was that he was going to alter the thing that makes it possible for any woman to handle any man. And that just couldn't be. How could he change human nature?"

"How? How? He's the scientist. I'm not. I simply eliminate that 'how' from my thinking. The worrisome thing about it is that he doesn't think in small ways about small issues. I'm afraid that's just what he meant—that he was going to change some factor in humanity that is responsible for this power we have over men."

"Oh...really," said Jenny. She looked up at Lucinda, moved her hands uneasily. "Lucinda, I know how great the doctor is, and how much you think of him, but—no one man could do such a thing! Not outside of his own home." She grinned fleetingly. "Probably not inside of it, for very long...I never understood just what sort of a scientist he is. Can you tell me, I mean, aside from any secret projects he might be on? Like Bob, now; Bob's a high-temperature metallurgist. What is the

doctor, exactly?"

"That's the right question to ask," Lucinda said, and her voice was shadowed. "Dr. Lefferts is a—well, the closest you could get to it would be to call him a specializing non-specialist. You see, science has reached the point where each branch of it continually branches into specialties, and each specialty has its own crop of experts. Most experts live in the confines of their own work. The doctor was saying just the other day that he'd discovered a fluorine-boron step-reaction in mineralogy that had been known for so long that the mineralogists had forgotten about it—yet it was unknown to metallurgy. Just as I said a moment ago, his mind is great, and—different. His job is to draw together the chemists and the biologists, the pure mathematicians and the practical physicists, the clinical psychologists and the engineers and all the other -ists and -ologies. His specialty is scientific thought as applied to all the sciences. He has no assignments except to survey all the fields and transfer needed information from one to the other. There has never been such a position in the Institute before, nor a man to fill it. And there is no other institute like this one on earth.

"He has entree into every shop and lab and library in this Institute. He can do anything or get anything done in any of them.

"And when he said 'I shall alter it,' he meant what he said!"

"I never knew that's what he did," breathed Jenny. "I never knew that's what...*who* he is."

"That's who he is."

"But what can he change?" Jenny burst out. "What can he change in us, in all men, in all women? What is the power he's talking about, and where does it come from, and what would...will...happen if it's changed?"

"I don't know," Lucinda said thoughtfully, "I—do—not—know. The blonde in the convertible...that sort of thing is just one of the things a woman naturally does, because she is a woman, without thinking of it."

Unexpectedly, Jenny giggled. "You don't plan those things. You just do them. It's nice when it works. A better roast from the butcher. A reminder from one of the men at the bank that a cheque's overdrawn,

in time to cover it.”

“I know,” smiled Lucinda, “I know. It’s easy and inaccurate to say that all those men are on the prowl—or all those women either. A few are, but most are not. The willingness of men to do things for women has survived even equal opportunities and equal pay for women. The ability of women to get what they want from men lies completely in their knowledge of that willingness. So the thing my husband wants to alter—*will* alter—lies in that department.”

“Lucinda, why don’t you just ask him?”

“I shall. But I don’t know if I’ll get an answer. If he regards it as a security matter, nothing will get it out of him.”

“You’ll tell me, won’t you?”

“Jenny, my sweet, if he tells me nothing, I can’t tell you. If he tells me and asks me to keep his confidence, I won’t tell you. If he tells me and puts no restrictions on it, I’ll tell you everything.”

“But—”

“I know, dear. You’re thinking that it’s a bigger thing than just what it might mean to the two of us. Well, you’re right. But down deep I’m confident. I’d pit few women against most men and expect them to win out. But anytime all womankind is against all mankind, the men don’t stand a chance. Think hard about it, anyway. At least we should be able to figure out where the attack is coming from.”

“At least you admit it’s an attack.”

“You bet your sweet life it’s an attack. There’s been a woman behind most thrones all through history. The few times that hasn’t been true, it’s taken a woman to clean up the mess afterward. We won’t give up easily, darling!”

” ‘The north wind doth blow, and we shall have snow,’ and so on,” said Lucinda as she lit the fire. “I’m going to need a new coat.”

“Very well,” said Dr. Lefferts.

“A fur coat this time.”

“Fur coats,” pronounced the doctor, “are impractical. Get one with the fur inside. You’ll keep warmer with less to carry.”

“I want a fur coat with the fur outside, where it shows.”

“I understand and at times admire the decorative compulsions,” said the doctor, rising from the adjusted cube he used for an easy chair, “but not when they are unhealthy, uneconomical, and inefficient. My dear, vanity does not become you.”

“A thing that has always fascinated me,” said Lucinda in a dangerously quiet voice, “in rabbits, weasels, skunks, pumas, pandas, and mink, and all other known mammals and marsupials, is their huge vanity. They *all* wear their fur outside.”

He put on his pince-nez to stare at her. “Your logic limits its factors. I find such sequences remarkable because of the end results one may obtain. However, I shall not follow this one.”

“If you’re so preoccupied with efficiency and function,” she snapped, “why do you insist on wearing those pince-nez instead of getting corneal lenses?”

“Functional living is a pattern which includes all predictable phenomena,” he said reasonably. “One of these is habit. I recognize that I shall continue to like pince-nez as much as I shall continue to dislike rice pudding. My functionalism therefore includes these glasses and excludes that particular comestible. If you had the fur-coat habit, the possibility of a fur coat would be calculable. Since you have never had such a coat, we can consider the matter disposed of.”

“I think some factors were selected for that sequence,” said Lucinda between her teeth, “but I can’t seem to put my finger on the missing ones.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said,” appended Lucinda distinctly, “that speaking of factors, I wonder how you’re coming with your adjustments of human nature to

eliminate the deadliness of the female.”

“Oh, that. I expect results momentarily.”

“Why bother?” she said bitterly. “My powers don’t seem to be good enough for a fur coat as it is.”

“Oh,” he said mildly, “were you using them?”

Because she was Lucinda, she laughed. “No, darling, I wasn’t.” She went to him and pressed him back into the big cubicle chair and sat on the arm. “I was demanding, cynical, and unpleasant. These things in a woman represent the scorched earth retreat rather than the looting advance.”

“An excellent analogy,” he said. “Excellent. It has been a long and bitter war, hasn’t it? And now it’s coming to an end. It is an extraordinary thing that in our difficult progress toward the elimination of wars, we have until now ignored the greatest and most pernicious conflict of all—the one between the sexes.”

“Why so pernicious?” she chuckled. There are times when it’s rather fun.

He said solemnly, “There are moments of exhilaration, even of glory, in every great conflict. But such conflicts tear down so much more than they build.”

“What’s been so damaging about the war between the sexes?”

“Though it has been the women who made men, it has been largely men who have made the world as we know it. However, they have had to do so against a truly terrible obstacle: the emotional climate created by women. Only by becoming an ascetic can a man avoid the oscillations between intoxication and distrust instilled into him by women. And ascetics usually are already insane or rapidly become so.”

“I think you’re overstating a natural state of affairs.”

“I am overstating,” he admitted, “for clarity’s sake, and off the record. However, this great war is by no means natural. On the contrary, it is a most unnatural state of affairs. You see, *homo sapiens* is, in one small

but important respect, an atypical mammal.”

“Do tell.”

He raised his eyebrows, but continued. “In virtually all species but ours, the female has a rigidly fixed cycle of conjugal acceptability.”

“But the human female has a—”

“I am not referring to that lunar cycle, unmentionable everywhere except in blatant magazine advertisements,” he said shortly, “but a cycle of desire. Of rut.”

“A pretty word.” Her eyes began to glitter.

“Mahomet taught that it occurred every eight days, Zoroaster nine days, Socrates and Solomon agreed on ten. Everyone else, as far as I can discover, seems to disagree with these pundits, or to ignore the matter. Actually there are such cycles, but they are subtle at best, and differ in the individual from time to time, with age, physical experience, geography, and even emotional state. These cycles are vestigial; the original, *natural* cycle disappeared early in the history of the species, and has been trembling on the verge ever since. It will be a simple matter to bring it back.”

“May I ask how?”

“You may not. It is a security matter.”

“May I then ask what effect you expect this development to have?”

“Obvious, isn’t it? The source of woman’s persistent and effective control over man, the thing that makes him subject to all her intolerances, whims, and bewildering coyness, is the simple fact of her perennial availability. She has no regular and predictable cycle of desire. The lower animals have. During the brief time that a female mouse, a marten, or a mare is approachable, every male of her species in the vicinity will know of it and seek her out; will, in effect, drop everything to answer a basic call. But unless and until that call occurs, the male is free to think of other things. With the human female, on the other hand, the call is mildly present at all times, and the male is *never* completely free to think of other things. It is natural for this drive to be strong. It is unnatural indeed for it to be constant. In this

respect Freud was quite correct; nearly every neurosis has a sexual basis. We are a race of neurotics, and the great wonder is that we have retained any of the elements of sanity at all. I shall liberate humanity from this curse. I shall restore the natural alternations of drive and rest. I shall free men to think and women to take their rightful places as thinking individuals beside them, rather than be the forced-draught furnaces of sexual heat they have become.”

“Are you telling me,” said Lucinda in a small, shocked voice, “that you have found a way to—to neuterize women except for a few hours a month?”

“I am and I have,” said Dr. Lefferts. “And incidentally, I must say I am grateful to you for having turned me to this problem.” He looked up sharply. “Where are you going, my dear?”

“I’ve got to th-think,” said Lucinda, and ran from the room. If she had stayed there for another fifteen seconds, she knew she would have crushed his skull in with the poker.

“Who-oh, Lucinda? How nice. Come in...why, what’s the matter?”

“Jenny, I’ve got to talk to you. Is Bob home?”

“No. He’s got night duty at the high-temperature lab this week. Whatever is wrong?”

“It’s the end of the world,” said Lucinda in real anguish. She sank down on the sofa and looked up at the younger woman. “My husband is putting a—a chastity belt on every woman on earth.”

“A *what*?”

“A chastity belt.” She began to laugh hysterically. “With a time-lock on it.”

Jenny sat beside her. “Don’t,” she said. “Don’t laugh like that. You’re frightening me.”

Lucinda lay back, gasping. “You should be frightened...Listen to me, Jenny. Listen carefully, because this is the biggest thing that has happened since the deluge.” She began to talk.

Five minutes later Jenny asked dazedly, “You mean—if this crazy thing happens, Bob won’t...won’t *want* me most of the time?”

“It’s you who won’t do any wanting. And when you don’t, he won’t either...It isn’t that that bothers me so much, Jenny, now that I’ve had a chance to think about it. I’m worried about the revolution.”

“What revolution?”

“Why, this is going to cause the greatest upheaval of all time! Once these cycles become recognized for what they are, there will be fireworks. Look at the way we dress, the way we use cosmetics. Why do we do it? Basically, to appear to be available to men. Practically all perfumes have a musk or musk-like base for that very reason. But how long do you think women will keep up the hypocrisy of lipstick and plunging necklines when men *know* better—*know* that they couldn’t possibly be approachable all the time? How many men will let their women appear in public looking as if they were?”

“They’ll tie us up in the house the way I do Mitzi-poodle,” said Jenny in an awed tone.

“They’ll leave us smugly alone with easy minds for three weeks out of four,” said Lucinda, “and stand guard over us like bull elk the rest of the time, to keep other men away.”

“Lucinda!” Jenny squeaked and covered her face in horror. “What about other women? How can we compete with another woman when she’s—she’s—and we’re not?”

“Especially when men are conditioned the way they are. Women will want to stick to one man, more likely than not. But men—men, building up pressures for weeks on end...”

“There’ll be harems again,” said Jenny.

“This is the absolute, final, bitter end of any power we ever had over the beasts, Jenny—do you see that? All the old tricks—the arch half-promise, the come-on, the manipulations of jealousy—they’ll be

utterly meaningless! The whole arsenal of womankind is based on her ability to yield or not to yield. And my husband is going to take the choice away from us. He's going to make absolutely certain that at one time we can't yield, and at another time we must!"

"And they'll never have to be nice to us at either time," added Jenny miserably.

"Women," said Lucinda bitterly, "are going to have to work for a living."

"But we do!"

"Oh, you know what I mean, Jenny! The lit-tul wife in the lit-tul home...that whole concept is based on women's perpetual availability. We're not going to be able to be homemakers, in that sense, at monthly intervals."

Jenny jumped up. Her face was chalky. "He hasn't stopped any war," she ground out. Lucinda had never seen her like this. "He's started one, and it's a beaut. Lucinda, he's got to be stopped, even if you—we have to..."

"Come on."

They started for Dr. Lefferts' house, striding along like a couple of avenging angels.

"Ah," said Dr. Lefferts, rising politely. "You brought Jenny. Good evening, Jenny."

Lucinda planted herself in front of him and put her hands on her hips. "You listen to me," she growled. "You've got to stop that nonsense about changing women."

"It is not nonsense and I shall do nothing of the kind."

"Dr. Lefferts," said Jenny in a quaking voice, "can you really do this—this awful thing?"

"Of course," said the doctor. "It was quite simple, once the principles

were worked out.”

“It *was* quite simple? You men you’ve already—”

Dr. Lefferts looked at his watch. “At two o’clock this afternoon. Seven hours ago.”

“I think,” said Lucinda quietly, “that you had better tell us just exactly what you did, and what we can expect.”

“I told you it is a security matter.”

“What has my libido to do with national defense?”

“That,” said the doctor, in a tone which referred to *that* as the merest trifle, “is a side issue. I coincided it with a much more serious project.”

“What could be more serious than...”

“There’s only one thing *that* serious, from a security standpoint,” said Lucinda. She turned to the doctor. “I know better than to ask you any direct questions. But if I assume that this horrible thing was done in conjunction with a superbomb test—just a guess, you understand—is there any way for an H-blast to bring about a change in women such as you describe?”

He clasped both hands around one knee and looked up at her in genuine admiration. “Brilliant,” he said. “And most skillfully phrased. Speaking hypothetically—hypothetically, you understand,” he interjected, waving a warning finger, “a hydrogen bomb has an immense power of diffusion. A jet of energy of that size, at that temperature, for even three or four microseconds, is capable of penetrating the upper reaches of stratosphere. But the effect does not end there. The upward displacement causes great volumes of air to rush in toward the rushing column from all sides. This in turn is carried upward and replaced, a process which continues for a considerable time. One of the results must be the imbalance of any distinct high or low pressure areas within several thousand miles, and for a day or two freak weather developments can be observed. In other words, these primary and secondary effects are capable of diffusing a—ah—substance placed in the bomb throughout the upper atmosphere, where, in a matter of days, it will be diffused throughout the entire envelope.”

Lucinda clasped her hands in a slow, controlled way, as if one of them planned to immobilize the other and thereby keep both occupied.

“And is there any substance...I’m still asking hypothetical questions, you understand—is there anything which could be added to the hydrogen fusion reaction which might bring about these—these new cycles in women?”

“They are not new cycles,” said the doctor flatly. “They are as old as the development of warm-blooded animals. The lack of them is, in biological terms, a very recent development in an atypical mammal; so recent and so small that it is subject to adjustment. As to your hypothetical question”—he smiled—“I should judge that such an effect is perfectly possible. Within the extremes of temperature, pressure, and radiation which take place in a fusion reaction, many things are possible. A minute quantity of certain alloys, for example, introduced into the shell of the bomb itself, or perhaps in the structure of a supporting tower or even a nearby temporary shed, might key a number of phenomenal reaction chains. Such a chain might go through several phases and result in certain subtle isotopic alterations in one of the atmosphere’s otherwise inert gases, say xenon. And this isotope, acting upon the adrenal cortex and the parathyroid, which are instrumental in controlling certain cycles in the human body, might very readily bring about the effect we are discussing in an atypical species.”

Lucinda threw up her hands and turned to Jenny. “Then that’s it,” she said wearily.

“What’s ‘it’? What? I don’t understand,” whimpered Jenny. “What’s he done, Lucinda?”

“In his nasty, cold-blooded hypothetical way,” said Lucinda, “he has put something in or near an H-bomb which was tested today, which is going to have some effect on the air we breathe, which is going to do what we were discussing at your house.”

“Dr. Lefferts,” said Jenny piteously. She went to him, stood looking down at him as he sat primly in his big easy chair. “Why—*why*? Just to annoy us? Just to keep us from having a little, petty influence over you?”

“By no means,” said the doctor. “I will admit that I might have turned my ambition to the matter for such reasons. But some concentrated

thought brought up a number of extrapolations which are by no means petty.”

He rose and stood by the mantel, pince-nez in hand, the perfect picture of the Pedant At Home. “Consider,” he said. “*Homo sapiens*, in terms of comparative anatomy, should mature physically at 35 and emotionally between 30 and 40. He should have a life expectancy of between 150 and 200 years. And he unquestionably should be able to live a life uncluttered by such insistent trifles as clothing conventions, unfunctional chivalries, psychic turmoils and dangerous mental and physical escapes into what the psychologists call romances. Women should phase their sexual cycles with those of the seasons, gestate their young longer, and eliminate the unpredictable nature of their psycho-sexual appetites—the very basis of all their insecurity and therefore that of most men. Women will not be chained to these cycles, Jenny, and become breeding machines, if that’s what you fear. You will begin to live in and with these cycles as you live with a well-made and serviced automatic machine. You will be liberated from the constant control and direction of your somatic existence as you have been liberated from shifting gears in your car.”

“But...we’re not conditioned for such a change!” blazed Lucinda. “And what of the fashion industry...cosmetics...the entertainment world... what’s going to become of these and the millions of people employed by them, and the people dependent on all those people, if you do a thing like this?”

“The thing is done. As for these people...” He paused, “Yes, there will be some disturbance. A considerable one. But in overall historical terms, it will be slight and it will be brief. I like to think that the television serviceman is one who was liberated by the cotton gin and the power loom.”

“It’s...hard to think in historical terms just now,” said Lucinda. “Jenny, come on.”

“Where are you going?”

She faced him, her blued-steel eyes blazing. “Away from you. And I—I think I have a warning to give to the women.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said dryly. “They’ll find out in time. All you’ll succeed in doing is to alert many women to the fact that they will be unattractive to their husbands at times when other women may seem

more desirable. Women will not unite with one another, my dear, even to unite against men.”

There was a tense pause. Then Jenny quavered, “How long did you say this—this thing will take?”

“I did not say. I would judge between thirty-six and forty-eight hours.”

“I’ve got to get home.”

“May I come with you?” asked Lucinda.

Jenny looked at her, her full face, her ample, controlled body. A surprising series of emotions chased themselves across her young face. She said, “I don’t think...I mean...no, not tonight; I have to—to—goodnight, Lucinda.”

When she had gone, the doctor uttered one of his rare chuckles. “She has absorbed perhaps a tenth of this whole concept,” he said, “but until she’s sure of herself she’s not going to let you or any woman near her husband.”

“You...you complacent *pig!*” said Lucinda whitely. She stormed upstairs.

“Hello...hello—Jenny?”

“Lucinda! I’m—glad you called.”

Something cold and tense deep inside Lucinda relaxed. She sat down slowly on the couch, leaned back comfortably with the telephone cradled between her cheek and her wide soft shoulder. “I’m glad you’re glad, Jenny darling. It’s been six weeks...how are you?”

“I’m...all right now. It was pretty awful for a while, not knowing how it would be, waiting for it to happen. And when it did happen, it was hard to get used to. But it hasn’t changed things *too* much. How about you?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” said Lucinda. She smiled slowly, touched her tongue to her full lower lip. “Jenny, have you told anyone?”

“Not a soul. Not even Bob. I think he’s a little bewildered. He thinks I’m being very...understanding. Lucinda, is it wrong for me to let him think that?”

“It’s never wrong for a woman to keep her knowledge to herself if it makes her more attractive,” said Lucinda, and smiled again.

“How’s Dr. Lefferts?”

“He’s bewildered too. I suppose I’ve been a little...understanding too.” She chuckled.

Over the phone she heard Jenny’s answering laughter. “The poor things,” she said. “The poor, poor things. Lucinda—”

“Yes, honey?”

“I know how to handle this, now. But I don’t really understand it. Do you?”

“Yes, I think I do.”

“How can it be, then? How can this change in us affect men that way? I thought *we* would be the ones who would be turned off and on like a neon sign.”

“*What?* Now wait a minute, Jenny! You mean you don’t realize what’s happened?”

“That’s just what I said. How could such a change in women do such a thing to the men?”

“Jenny, I think you’re wonderful, wonderful, wonderful,” breathed Lucinda. “As a matter of fact, I think women are wonderful. I suddenly realized that you haven’t the foggiest notion of what’s happened, yet you’ve taken it in stride and used it *exactly* right!”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Jenny, do you feel any difference in yourself?”

“Why, no. All the difference is in Bob. That’s what I—”

“Honey, there *isn’t* any difference in you, nor in me, nor in any other woman. For the very first time in his scientific life, the great man made an error in his calculations.”

There was a silence for a time, and then the telephone uttered a soft, delighted, long-drawn-out “Oh-h-h-h-h...”

Lucinda said, “He’s sure that in the long run it will have all the benefits he described—the longer life expectancy, the subduing of insecurities, the streamlining of our manners and customs.”

“You mean that all men from now on will...”

“I mean that for about twelve days in every two weeks, men can’t do anything with us, which is restful. And for forty-eight hours they can’t do anything without us, which is”—she laughed—“useful. It would seem that *homo sapiens* is still an atypical mammal.”

Jenny’s voice was awed. “And I thought we were going to lose the battle of the sexes. Bob brings me little presents every single day, Lucinda!”

“He’d better. Jenny, put down that phone and come over here. I want to hug you. And”—she glanced over at the hall closet, where hung the symbol of her triumph—“I want to show you my new fur coat.”

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